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2. *Letter from Mr. Duponceau to the same, ordered by the Society to be published with the preceding one, to which it is an answer. Read September 20, 1839.*

MY DEAR SIR,

I have read, with great pleasure, the letter addressed to you by the Rev. Mr. Gutzlaff, dated Macao, the 2d of January, in the present year. I regret that that writer's excessive modesty has induced him to confine himself to a statement of facts which, interesting as they are, do not afford the solution of the important questions which are the object of my "Dissertation on the Nature and Character of the Chinese System of Writing." Possessed as he is, not only of the Chinese language, in which he has written a universal history, but of those of Cochinchina and Japan, he appears to me to overstep the bounds of Christian humility in disclaiming all pretensions to learning; I wish, therefore, that your respectable correspondent had entered into more details on the subject of which he treats, and not confined himself to generalities, as he appears to have done. I would have been happy to learn from him from what causes, in what manner, and to what extent the Chinese characters have become a kind of *pasigraphy* among those nations whom philologists distinguish by the name of *Indo-Chinese*. It is an object of curious inquiry, and which, when fully understood in all its bearings, will, in my humble opinion, throw considerable light on the history of the human mind.

I am particularly struck with the spirit of candour and the love of truth which pervades the whole of Mr. Gutzlaff's letter, therefore I am not disposed to controvert any thing that he asserts of his own knowledge; which, indeed, I should do with a very ill grace, as I cannot pretend to any thing like that knowledge he possesses of the Indo-Chinese languages, and their various systems of writing; I therefore must be considered, in the observations I am going to make, as the disciple asking questions of his master. It is in that sense only that I desire to be understood.

I fear that your learned correspondent has formed a higher opinion of the Chinese system of writing than I can bring my mind to acquiesce in. He

considers it to be *a gigantic effort of human genius*, and as performing what we should have deemed impossible.\* For my part, I confess that I cannot see it in that exalted light. The invention of writing, generally, may be, and is still every where, and, probably, with justice so considered. Almost all nations have attributed that invention to their gods, or to their heroes, but when comparing the Chinese system with the syllabic and elementary alphabets, I do not think that its invention is to be attributed to a greater effort of human genius. It was naturally pointed out by the peculiar structure of the spoken language. The analysis of sounds, separated from any meaning, required, indeed, an effort of the human mind; but when a language consisted only of a small number of monosyllables, each of which was a word, the most natural method that presented itself was to appropriate a written sign to each word, first by rude pictures of visible objects, afterwards by metaphorical images, and when these failed, then some new method, still founded on the system of a character or group of characters to each word, was gradually adopted, and at last methodized, when civilization had made sufficient progress to require it. For we must not believe that the Chinese system of writing was originally invented by philosophers, and came out complete, like Minerva from the head of Jupiter; it is more probable that it was the work of ages; and, indeed, the ancient illegible inscriptions that still exist are sufficient to convince us of it. The method that, in the end, has been adopted, to wit, the grouping of two or three words in their appropriate characters, to recall to the memory another word by something more or less connected with the idea that it represents, and the classing those groups under a certain number of keys or radicals is, indeed, ingenious; but I cannot see in it such an effort of the human mind as the analysis of unmeaning sounds which produced the syllabic and elementary alphabets. I believe, however, that the Chinese *lexigraphy* (as I have taken the liberty to call it) is well suited to the language for which it was made, and that it would be no improvement to substitute for it a common syllabary or an elementary alphabet. The reason is in the great number of hemophonous words in the Chinese language, which could not be so well distinguished, in writing, from each other, as by the system now in use. This ocular discrimination is the great advantage of the Chinese characters, which

\* Hist. of China, c. iii.

prevents much obscurity and ambiguity in books, where it cannot be explained or corrected as in oral conversation. Yet, we are told by M. Remusat that the merchants and others in China, in their familiar correspondence, make use but of one character for each monosyllable of the language; but as M. Remusat never was in China, and could know that only from hearsay, I shall make no observation upon it. I wish, however, that your friendly correspondent would throw some light upon this subject, and let us know how far M. Remusat is supported by facts in the statement that he makes.

But I am wandering from the main object that has induced me to address this letter to you. I wish to investigate, with the aid of your learned correspondent, if it can, without too much indiscretion, be obtained, the extent to which the Chinese characters serve as a means of communication between different nations who can neither speak nor understand each others' oral language, and the causes by which such a remarkable effect is produced. I once doubted the fact, because it was asserted as the proof of the alleged superiority of the Chinese alphabet, independently of the languages to which it is applied, and as a kind of pasigraphic system that might be applied to every idiom; but farther reflection, and an attentive study of the peculiar structure of the Chinese language, satisfied me that that fact might be admitted to a certain extent; hence, in my Dissertation, and before that, in my letter to Captain Hall, which is annexed to it, I did not venture to deny it in general terms, but only mentioned it as a subject requiring farther investigation; it is with a view to that investigation that I now address this letter to you.

Your correspondent is very explicit in his statement of the fact which we are investigating. I beg leave to quote here his own words:

"Having," says he, "myself acquired the Japanese, as well as Cochinchinese, and also had intercourse with the Coréans, of whom several are now at Macao, I can only extol the ease with which one may communicate to them by means of the Chinese characters, though not understanding a single word of their idiom. This does not refer to the learned classes only, but to the very fishermen and peasants, with only some exceptions. In the Loo-Choo islands men of distinction talk the Chinese with great fluency, but the bulk of the people speak a dialect of the Japanese, and use the Chinese characters as well as the Japanese syllabary."

From these facts, which the writer asserts of his own knowledge, and, therefore, which I am not disposed to controvert, he draws the following inference:

"It is, therefore, certain that the nations who have adopted the Chinese character attach the same meaning to it as the natives from whence it originally came, and that its construction is likewise retained, with scarcely any alterations."

Here I must acknowledge that I find myself embarrassed. Fortunately the writer does not state this as a fact founded on his knowledge of those languages, but as a mere inference. Were it otherwise, it would have embarrassed me still more; for your learned friend would have been in contradiction, not only with the grammars and other works that we possess concerning those idioms, but also with learned and respectable missionaries, like himself, from whose assertions I cannot withhold my assent. Thus, the Rev. Mr. Medhurst, in his excellent work upon China, relates, (chapter 13th,) that among a number of books which he sent to Drs. Morrison and Milne, and either copied or caused to be copied for them, there were the four books of Confucius, in Chinese, with a Japanese translation *interlined*, a work, says he, of *incalculable importance*, as showing that Chinese books, as they stand, are not intelligible to the mass of the Japanese, and need some addition, in order to general circulation. And a little farther he says: "It appears, from a comparison of these books, that the Chinese books are not in general use in Japan, *except when interlined with Japanese.*" Thus, in Roman Catholic countries, the liturgical books are given to the faithful in the Latin language, accompanied with a translation in the vernacular tongue.

And yet the same gentleman, in the fourth chapter of the same work, no doubt written before he had seen the books above mentioned, and reflected upon them, speaks of the Chinese characters precisely as your correspondent does, and says that they are generally read and understood, not only throughout the vast empire of China, but throughout Cochinchina, Coréa, and Japan; and that not only the characters, but the *style*, that is to say, the arrangement of the ideas, is likewise understood; which implies that in all those languages the structure, the metaphors, and the grammatical forms are the same, or nearly the same, which appears to be the opinion of your learned correspondent. You have seen how Mr. Medhurst afterwards corrects himself, with respect to the Japanese; and he seems to be astonished at his discovery, which, he says, is of

*incalculable importance.* And so, in fact, it is; but he does not seem to have sufficiently inquired into the cause of the fact that he points out, for he ascribes it to the difference between the Chinese and the Japanese systems of writing, the one being symbolic, as he conceives it, and the other alphabetical; whereas, in my opinion, it is rather to be attributed to the difference which exists between the oral languages, to which the same system of writing cannot be applied. I speak here only of the *Yomi* or polysyllabic languages of the Japanese, which is properly their *vernacular* tongue.

It is remarkable that these two gentlemen, Mr. Gutzlaff and Mr. Medhurst, both profess to be, and no doubt are, acquainted with the Japanese, as well as with the Chinese language; how, then, does it happen that they differ so widely on a subject which must be equally familiar to them both? With the most unfeigned respect for those venerable missionaries, I am forced to presume that they have studied the Chinese and Indo-Chinese languages so as to make them subservient to the performance of the duties of their holy office, without paying much attention to them in a philological point of view, so that they have been led into, perhaps, too general conclusions from the facts which have come under their observation. This appears to me to be sufficiently proved by the example of the Rev. Mr. Medhurst, who did not rectify his ideas on the subject of the Japanese language until an interlineal translation, joined to a Chinese text, convinced him that the Chinese characters were not so familiar to the Japanese as he had conceived.

In what I have ventured to write on the subject of the Chinese system of writing I have had no object in view but the discovery of truth. I found that subject involved in mystery; the Chinese characters represented by enthusiasm as something supernatural; their origin attributed to the philosophical combinations of a barbarous people; their effects magnified to a degree that exceeds belief; in short, I saw those characters raised to the rank of an original, of a universal language, to which spoken idioms were subordinate, and, as it were, auxiliary. My plain common sense revolted against those extravagant ideas, and I tried, with feeble means, to discover what that so much extolled system really was, and to bring it within the general rule by which it appears to me that all systems of writing are governed, which is to make it an ocular representation or image of spoken language, with which mankind began to communicate with each other, long before they thought of repre-

senting speech by figures or characters; I, therefore, submitted my views to the learned, in the hope of profiting by their knowledge, which so much exceeds mine. I am happy to find that they have been honoured with the notice of your correspondent, than whom, from his profound knowledge of the Chinese and Indo-Chinese languages, and their respective systems of writing, no one is better able to form a correct judgment upon the subject, and to throw light upon the obscurity in which it is still involved. I therefore submit to him, with due humility, the few observations that are to follow.

I admit, without difficulty, the fact stated by your respectable friend, to wit, that he has seen Japanese, Coréans, and Cochinchinese communicate, with ease, with each other by means of the Chinese characters. He adds that they did so without understanding "one single word" of each others' spoken language. This appears to me to be a very strong expression, which, perhaps, Mr. Gutzlaff will be disposed to modify. I shall not, however, contradict it for the present. This faculty, he says, is not confined to the learned classes, who speak the Chinese with great fluency, but extends to the very "fishermen and peasants." This cannot be meant to imply that all, or nearly all, the fishermen and peasants of those countries can read and write the Chinese; for Mr. Medhurst tells us that there are villages, even on the coast of China, where few, "if any," of the inhabitants can either read or write. This expression, therefore, must be understood in a restricted sense.

The fact that persons who do not understand each others' language can communicate with ease by means of a common written character is, as I have already observed, important enough to require to be critically examined, particularly in respect to its extent and the causes which produce it. Nothing that has been written on the subject as yet satisfies me. This phenomenon (if it may be so called) has been attributed to the almost magical powers of the Chinese alphabet; to its representing ideas unconnected with sounds; to its "permanent perspicuity," as Dr. Marshman expresses himself; nothing has been said of the monosyllabic character of the languages which employ that lexicographic alphabet, and of the similarity of their grammatical structure: the polysyllabic languages of Japan and other countries have been confounded with those, and, upon the whole, many things have been left obscure, which still require to be elucidated and explained. Not only the Indo-Chinese nations, but the Chinese themselves, inhabitants of different provinces or districts, have been said to

interchange ideas *merely* in writing, because of their ignorance of each others' dialects; all these things appear to me to demand investigation, and with this view I submit the following observations to your learned correspondent, in hopes that he will deign to favour us with his own.

In order to observe some method in this examination, and for the sake of clearness, I shall consider, separately, the four following languages, or classes of languages, to wit:—1. The various dialects of the Chinese empire. 2d. The Annamitic languages. 3d. The languages of Japan and the Loo-Choo Islands. 4th. The Coréan. I shall not do this with a view to contradict the fact stated in a general manner by your learned friend, but to reconcile it, as far as will be in my power, to the natural order of things, and, if possible, to ascertain its extent and its causes. That several thousand written characters should serve as a means of communication between hundreds of millions of people, between provinces and districts, and even independent nations, who do not understand each others' oral languages, is a fact that strikes, at first view, with wonder and astonishment. Mankind are now too enlightened to ascribe such things to causes out of the ordinary course of nature, or to gaze upon them with stupid wonder; they will inquire and investigate, and will not be satisfied with theories founded on mere conjecture. I have shown, in my Dissertation, what wild theories were recurred to, to explain this apparent phenomenon; theories which led to the absurd inference that the art of writing existed before the exercise of the natural gift of speech. It is time to adopt more rational conclusions, and for that purpose facts must be collected and brought together in one point of view, so that fair deductions may be obtained from their concentrated light. It is with this view that I submit the following facts and observations to the superior knowledge of your learned correspondent.

### I. *Dialects of the Chinese Language.*

We are told by the Rev. Mr. Medhurst, in the Preface to his Dictionary of the Dialect of the Province of Fo kien, which he writes “Füh-këèn,” and I know no other work of the same kind, that there are no less than two hundred of those dialects in the Chinese empire. The people of the different districts, it is said, or most of them, do not understand each other when speaking, but communicate together by means of the Chinese *written language*, as it is called.

This, says Dr. Marshman, is to be attributed to the *permanent perspicuity* of the characters which he calls *κατ' εξοχην*, the Chinese *language*. This is a strong fact, if true to the extent that it is represented. I fear, however, that there is in this a great deal of exaggeration.

Very little is known in this part of the world, and in Europe, respecting those dialects. It is said that a vocabulary of that of Canton has been printed at Macao or Serampore, (I do not remember which,) but it has never made its way to this country, at least that I know of. The indefatigable Mr. Medhurst has given us, as I have said before, a copious dictionary of the dialect of Fo-kien, but I do not feel myself competent to compare it with the pure Chinese, or, in other words, with the mandarin dialect; I leave that to your learned correspondent, who is skilled in both, and I shall content myself with stating facts, extracted from the works of the most approved authors.

Dr. Marshman, in his *Clavis Sinica*, or Grammar of the Chinese Language, has a chapter entirely devoted to the dialects of the Celestial Empire. In that chapter, p. 560, he clearly describes the general character of those dialects, and their differences from the mandarin dialect, or pure Chinese. "Besides," says he, "the difference of pronunciation, the modes by which the colloquial dialects are varied are generally three: the introduction of words which have no characters; the use of words to which certain spurious characters are affixed; and the application of certain characters in a sense not given them in the dictionaries. The variations observable in the Canton dialect" (which, by the by, is the southernmost province of the empire, while Petchelee, in which Pekin is situated, is the northernmost) "do not affect the substantives; these, as well as most of the verbs, are the same as in the mandarin dialect, except as varied by a corrupt pronunciation. The principal variations are in the pronouns."

These differences are very trifling; and it appears, also, that they consist as much in the alteration, substitution, and misapplication of the characters as in the spoken language. The greatest difference appears from Dr. Marshman's statement to be in the pronunciation; and that, if carried to the extent which is insinuated, would, in fact, prevent all oral communication between the inhabitants of the different provinces, and reduce them to the necessity of conversing in writing as well as they could. But, according to the relation of a learned English missionary, who is worthy of the highest credit, that difficulty

of conversing orally does not appear to be, by any means, so great as it has been represented; it appears to me, on the contrary, that there is no such difficulty at all, and that the inhabitants of China may converse, with the greatest ease, with those who speak the mandarin language, and be understood by them, notwithstanding the difference of their dialects.

The Rev. Mr. Medhurst, whose various writings have thrown considerable light on this important subject, in his interesting work entitled "China, its State and Prospects," relates that, in the year 1835, he hired, at Canton, the brig Huron, for a voyage of several months along the eastern coast of China. Their object was to stop at every place where they could get admittance, to converse with the inhabitants and distribute to them Chinese Bibles, tracts, and other religious books. Mr. Medhurst took with him the Rev. Mr. Stevens, who had accompanied your correspondent, in 1831, on a similar voyage, and who was acquainted with the Chinese language. They sailed from Canton, and visited the whole coast and all the maritime provinces of the empire, except Petchelee, which is the northernmost, and where the capital of the empire is situated. They landed at a great number of towns and villages in the different provinces, and there freely conversed with the inhabitants, and distributed their books, sometimes with, and sometimes without interruption from the authorities. At every place where they landed they held conversations, not only with the mandarins and officers of the government, but with persons of all descriptions, and with *assembled multitudes*, even in places where, as he says, "few of the inhabitants, *if any*, could either read or write." There is not, at any time or at any place throughout the whole of this widely extended coast, containing several large provinces and a multitude of districts, the least mention made of an interpreter being employed or conversation carried on in writing, but every thing, as far as appears, was said, and all business transacted by word of mouth, always with the greatest ease. The pure Chinese or mandarin dialect would seem to have been the medium used. In one place the people wondered that foreigners could speak so purely the Chinese language; they believed the missionaries to be natives of the empire; in another they believed that as their emperor was the master of the whole world, there could be but one language on the face of the earth, and that was the Chinese. The missionaries were acquainted with the dialect of Canton, and with three of those of the adjoining province of Fo-kien, to wit, that of

Fo-kien proper, and those of the county of Chang-chow, and the district of Chang-poo, in the same province, with the natives of which they had had much communication in the Chinese colonies in the Indian seas; but they could not be familiar with the dialects of the more northern provinces which they visited; there must, therefore, have been a common medium of oral communication between them and the inhabitants. Why, then, was not the written medium, that universal language, as it is called, made use of, or even at any time or on any occasion called to their aid in those distant places? This, I must confess, shakes my belief in a great degree; at least as far as respects China itself, where sinologists tell us that even those who can converse together in the mandarin tongue, even the learned mandarins, are sometimes obliged to trace characters with their fingers in the air, when they cannot make themselves understood by word of mouth. I suspect that there is here a great deal of exaggeration; no one is better able than your learned correspondent to explain it.

## II. *Annamitic Languages.*

We are now out of the limits of the Celestial Empire; but we have not yet taken leave of the Chinese race, to which the people of the country I am going to describe appear to me to belong.

The country called *Annam*, or *Anam*, which means "the country of the south," is situated on a tongue of land at the southern extremity of the China Sea. It is bounded to the north by the Chinese empire, to the east and south by the sea, and to the west by a chain of mountains, which separates it from the kingdom of Siam, and from the countries that are called the Birman empire. It contains the kingdoms of Tunkin and Cochinchina, to which the name of Annam is more especially applied, and the lesser states of Cambodia, Laos, and Ciampa. Of the languages of the last three we know absolutely nothing; we only presume that they are monosyllabic, like those of Tunkin and Cochinchina. I see, with pleasure, that your correspondent has composed a dictionary of the Cambodian language, which he kindly offers to present to our society, who, I have no doubt, will receive with gratitude that valuable present, and be the first to make known the Cambodian language to America and Europe, as they have done the Cochinchinese. We may hope, hereafter, to become acquainted with the idioms of Laos and Ciampa. There is nothing

that cannot be expected from the efforts of the zealous propagators of the Christian faith.

The languages of Tunkin and Cochinchina are considered as the same, or nearly the same. They are both monosyllabic, and their grammatical structure does not appear to differ from that of the Chinese. Indeed, it would seem as if the simplicity of monosyllabic languages did not admit of much difference in their syntax. Mr. Naxcra, in his Dissertation on the Language of the Othoni Indians, which has been published in the fifth volume of the new series of our Transactions, has shown the most striking coincidences between the phraseology of that language and that of the Chinese. I am told that there are persons in Europe, and in this country, who contest the fact of the Othoni idiom being monosyllabic. If they will only take the trouble to read attentively Mr. Naxcra's Dissertation, with the numerous examples that he has given of that language, and the translations that he has made into it, with the addition of grammatical explanations and notes, they will be convinced that it is impossible for human ingenuity to invent and impose upon the learned world such a tissue of imposture as he must necessarily have been guilty of, if his accusers are well grounded in their assertions, and to make a monosyllabic out of a polysyllabic language, without ever contradicting himself or betraying the imposition; besides that there are, in print, several grammars and vocabularies of that idiom, by which he might easily be confuted. But it is easier to criticise than to read.

We should know but very little of the Annamitic languages if it were not for the Cochinchinese vocabularies, for which our country and philology are indebted to the munificence of the reverend father Joseph Morrone. We understand that a complete dictionary of that idiom, compiled by the Vicar Apostolical of the Catholic church in Cochinchina, is now in a course of publication under the auspices of the Honourable the East India Company; and what adds to my satisfaction is, that your respectable correspondent is himself master of that language, and has a dictionary of it in his possession. I regret that he did not take the trouble to give you his opinion of Father Morrone's vocabularies, which, hitherto, I have no reason to believe otherwise than correct, and deserving of full credit. The comparison of this language with the Chinese, by M. de la Palun, is a hasty production, for reasons which I have explained in the preface which precedes them; therefore it would have been

very gratifying to me to know whether the inferences that I have drawn from it are justified by a full comparison of the two languages and their system of writing, made by such a master hand as that of your correspondent. It would show clearly whether and how far the Chinese characters, as applied by the two nations to their respective idioms, can serve as a common medium of communication between them, when they are ignorant of each others' spoken language.

From the lights that we possess it would appear that the languages of China and Cochinchina, though both monosyllabic, and having the same grammatical structure, are yet very different from each other. That there are in the latter a number of Chinese words more or less corrupted cannot be denied; but the mass of the language shows clearly that the two nations cannot understand one another when speaking. The same difference appears in the written characters; they have been originally Chinese, and many of them remain such, but a great number are so altered in their form as not to be recognised, while those, the form of which has not been varied, are either differently combined or associated together, or are applied to represent words different from those which they express in Chinese; and what is most remarkable is, that, in many instances, they have been applied to words which, in Chinese and Cochinchinese, have the same sound, but not the same meaning. From this I would naturally conclude that the two nations cannot understand each other in writing any more than orally, at least to any considerable extent.

There can be no doubt that those nations are all of the same race, and descended from the same stock. It also clearly appears that civilization and the art of writing was introduced into the land of Annam by the Chinese; but the Annamites have been so long independent of the Celestial Empire, if ever they were subjected to it, that it is not extraordinary that their language and their writing should have experienced considerable changes in the course of so many ages.

That being the case, it will be asked: How comes it, then, that the Cochinchinese and the Chinese understand each other in writing, though they cannot by word of mouth? The enthusiasts attribute this to some mysterious virtue in the Chinese characters; to their *permanent perspicuity*, as Dr. Marshman expresses it; but the philosopher seeks for more natural causes; he knows that writing was invented to be the representation of some oral language, and it is

by comparing the forms of the graphic system with those of the spoken idiom that he hopes to obtain the solution of the important problem that has so much *puzzled* the sinologists of Europe.

If there is any perspicuity in the Chinese written characters, it is not in their outward forms, which, whatever some of them may have been in the beginning, are now nothing more than linear and angular figures, which present, of themselves, no idea to the mind, but in the method and arrangement of them that has been adopted by the Chinese grammarians, and which the languages to which that system was to be applied necessarily required. The monosyllabic languages are devoid of grammatical forms; their words are not, as in the idioms of Europe and Western Asia, derived from roots that lead to the understanding of their numerous derivatives; no one monosyllable is connected, as to its sense or meaning, with another by means of some slight alteration; but, on the contrary, the same word or monosyllable sometimes serves to express twenty or thirty, and sometimes even fifty different ideas; and the only mode of discrimination between them is by the tone of voice or accent, by the *juxta-position* of the words to each other, and by joining two words together to show the separate meaning of one. This, in speaking, is of little consequence; for it is well known, whatever may have been said to the contrary, that the Chinese, in conversation, understand one another perfectly well, and without the least difficulty. For this I have the testimony of the Chinese themselves, several of whom I have interrogated on this particular point, and who have uniformly given me the same answer. I have also heard them converse together, and never have seen them embarrassed. Besides, if there was any ambiguity in their discourse, it might be easily corrected at the moment.

But, in inventing a system of writing for such a language, it was necessary to prevent ambiguities which the author would not be at hand to correct. For this reason different characters were applied to the same monosyllable, to show in what sense it was to be understood. This was done by uniting two or more characters, each representing a particular word, to show in what sense the word represented was to be taken. This has given rise to the notion that Chinese characters represent abstract ideas, when, in fact, they are but a method of spelling the same word, analogous to the different orthography that we employ in writing homophonous words, such as *sea* and *see*; *scene* and *seen*; *grate* and *great*, &c. Thus the Chinese system of writing was invented to

suit the language to which it was to be applied. The inventors never thought of representing ideas any farther than was necessary to recall to the memory a particular word by a short explanation of its meaning, in which they have not always been very successful.

In process of time they have methodized the system by classing their words under a certain number of keys, or radicals, which, while they facilitate the understanding of the words placed under them, afford to the student an easy way of finding them in the dictionaries.

The Chinese system, therefore, may be considered as an ingenious invention, as applied to monosyllabic languages; and it is, perhaps, the only system suited to them; but, abstractedly speaking, it does not appear to me to be more ingenious than that of syllabic and elementary alphabets, which are also suited to the languages for which they were made.

What has contributed most to the admiration which the Chinese system of writing every where commands, is the facility with which nations who cannot speak or understand each others' oral language communicate with each other by means of the Chinese written characters. Hence it has been supposed, and it has become almost the general belief, that those characters represent ideas entirely abstracted from speech. Your learned correspondent, with better judgment, has attributed that facility, as far as it extends, to the similarity of the grammatical structure of the languages of the various nations who thus communicate. As far as it regards the monosyllabic languages, like those I am now speaking of, I agree with him so far, that this similarity in the structure of those languages contributes much to the facility to which he adverts, but I am far from thinking that it is its only cause. I must explain myself a little farther.

It being admitted that the Chinese and Annamitic languages, though differing in the sounds of their words, do not differ materially in their structure and grammatical forms; that every Chinese word (with, perhaps, a few exceptions) has a corresponding word in the Tunkinese and Cochinchinese which has precisely the same meaning, and that they use, in writing, the same characters, though their forms and their application to the words of the language have much varied in the course of a long series of ages, it naturally follows that, as far as those forms have not materially varied, and are still applied to the corresponding words in the two languages, the Chinese and Cochinchinese may com-

municate by writing, though they cannot by words. But, if we can judge from Father Morrone's Cochinchinese Vocabulary, with the characters annexed, it would seem that that cannot take place to a very great extent. We must look, therefore, to some other cause.

We find, from the Cochinchinese and Latin Dictionary published with my Dissertation, that the Chinese language is taught in the schools of Cochinchina, as well as their own. As the Chinese is the religious and literary language of the country, which does not appear to have a literature of its own, it is necessary that it should be learned, in order to understand Chinese books. There is no need, for that purpose, of their learning the spoken language; at least, they need not pay much attention to the spoken words; they study the characters as a different *spelling* of their own, as in our schools we might be taught the ancient Gothic letters, if there were an object deserving of it. As far, therefore, as respects the Annamitic nations, I do not differ much from your learned correspondent; but we do not seem to agree as regards the polysyllabic languages, of which I am now going to speak.

### III. *Languages of Japan and the Loo-Choo Islands.*

We must now take leave of the Chinese race. We are among different nations, the origin of whom is not well ascertained. From the physical conformation of the Japanese, some naturalists have thought that they were a mixture of the Chinese and Tartar races; but their language does not warrant this supposition. It seems evident, however, that they were civilized by the Chinese, and they, at present, acknowledge the literary and moral supremacy of the great empire, but they are under no kind of civil subjection to it. They are, and have been, independent from time immemorial.

We know very little as yet of the vernacular language of the Loo-Choo Islands. It is, however, well ascertained that it is a dialect of the Japanese, and, like it, polysyllabic. It is probable that those islands are inhabited by colonies from Japan. I shall therefore confine my observations to the language of the latter country; from the information we have, they may, I think, also be applied to the Loo-Chooan.

We are, fortunately, well acquainted with the national language of Japan. The works of Thunberg, Siebold, Klaproth, and Medhurst, and, above all, the

excellent grammar of that language by Father Rodriguez, translated into French by M. Landresse, with the explanations of M. Remusat, and the supplement to it by the learned William Humboldt, chiefly extracted from the grammars of the same language by Fathers Alvarez, Collado, and Oyanguren, which are now very rare, leave us nothing to wish for upon the subject. The whole Japanese language is thus spread before us. It is called the *Yomi*.

This language is entirely different from the Chinese; there is no analogy or affinity between them. A number of Chinese words have crept into it, but their foreign origin is easily perceived. The Japanese is polysyllabic, and abounds in grammatical forms. The nouns are declined by suffixed particles, and the verbs are conjugated by means of terminations and inflections; they have adjective verbs, like our Indian languages. The syntax is subject to rules, and the order in which the words are placed, says Father Rodriguez, is quite the reverse of that of the Chinese. It is evident, therefore, that the Chinese system of writing could not be applied to it.

The Japanese received the art of writing from the Chinese. But their teachers, as well as themselves, soon perceived that the same system could not be applied to both languages, and that the Japanese could not be written *lexigraphically*. They therefore determined upon giving them a syllabic alphabet. Out of the many thousand Chinese characters they chose forty-seven, without paying any regard to their meaning, but only to their sounds, and applied these to the forty-seven syllables of which the Japanese language is composed. Thus was formed the Japanese alphabet, which they call *i ro fa*, or, according to Medhurst, *i lo ha*, from the first three letters of which it is composed.

If the Japanese had no other language and no other alphabet than those I have described, it is evident that they could not understand or make themselves understood by the Chinese, verbally or in writing.

But the Chinese, when they introduced civilization into Japan, introduced, also, their language, which is there called the *koye*, which means *Chinese words*. The pure *koye*, says Father Rodriguez, is the *Chinese*. It is there a spoken as well as a written language, for it is clear that it could not be read into *Yomi*, any more than Greek or Latin into English, without translating. But such is the difference between the vocal organs of the two nations, that they cannot understand each other when speaking the same idiom. The Japanese cannot pronounce the nasal vowels of the Chinese, who have conso-

nants that the Japanese cannot articulate, and *vice versa*. Thus the pronunciation has become so different as to make it almost two different languages, although it is easy to perceive that it is the same idiom differently articulated. I have given examples of this difference in my Dissertation, p. 91.

I can thus easily understand how the Japanese cannot converse orally with the Chinese, either by means of the *Yomi*, or of the *Koye*, or of the Mandarin dialect, and how they can more easily communicate by means of the Chinese characters. But I cannot so easily conceive how peasants and fishermen acquire sufficient knowledge to enable them to do so. I can only account for it by the Chinese, or *Koye*, being a religious as well as a learned language. Religion can perform wonders.

Father Rodriguez tells us that there are three languages or dialects in Japan, which he thus describes:

“The first is the pure *Yomi*, which is the natural and primitive dialect of the nation; they write in it works of light poetry and literature.

“The second is the pure *Koye* (or Chinese;) the priests employ it in their religious works.

“The third is a mixture of *Yomi* and *Koye*; it is the vulgar language of the empire. It must be observed, however, that the ordinary language, that is to say, that in common use, is almost entirely composed of *Yomi*, with some mixture of *Koye*, while in the literary and oratorical style there is much more *Koye* than *Yomi*.”

It follows from the above, that books of light reading, in poetry or prose, are written in the national language, or *Yomi*; that religious books are written in pure *Koye*, or Chinese, and scientific and literary works in a mixed dialect, containing more of the *Koye* than of the *Yomi*. I presume that in those books the *Koye* is written in the Chinese lexicographic, and the *Yomi* in the Japanese syllabic alphabet. It must make a curious mixture; and it is worth inquiry how and how far the peasants and fishermen are instructed in the *Koye* language and system of writing. I suppose that the same thing may be said of the people of Loo-Choo.

#### IV. *The Corœan.*

The peninsula of Corœa is situated between China and Japan, and separated from those countries, on each side, by a narrow straight. It is bounded on the

north and north-west by Chinese Tartary, every where else by the sea. It is tributary to the empire of China.

We should know very little of the language of that country if it were not for the recent publication of the Rev. Mr. Medhurst, entitled "A Comparative Vocabulary of the Chinese, Corœan, and Japanese Languages," compiled by a native of Corea, which has lately made its way into this country. I have had the book but a few days in my possession, through the kindness of my learned friend Mr. Pickering, of Boston, to whom it belongs. I have not, therefore, been able to study it as much as I wished. It is to be regretted that the venerable missionary contented himself with publishing a translation of that interesting work, to which he added very few observations of his own, from which, and the work itself, I have been able to deduce the following facts.

Corea, like Japan, has two languages, the one vernacular, the other learned. In the former are written all works intended for common reading; works of higher literature are in the learned idiom.

The vernacular or popular language has no affinity with either the Chinese or Japanese; it is probably derived from some Tartar dialect. It is not, as far as I can judge, monosyllabic; and yet it does not appear to have words of a greater length than two syllables, but on this I have not had a sufficient opportunity to form a decided opinion. Of its syntax or grammatical forms I can say nothing. It has, like the Sanscrit, an alphabetic syllabary, which, I think, is much superior to that, from its simplicity and clearness. It is not, like the Japanese, formed out of Chinese characters. It consists of fifty-two elementary signs, of which twenty-seven, called initials, are single, double, or aspirated consonants, and twenty-five, called finals, are vowels or diphthongs. I mean diphthongs to the ear, and not to the eye.

By means of these fifty-two characters, joined or placed close to each other in the most ingenious manner, the six hundred and seventy-five syllables, of which the language consists, are represented, and never leave, as in the Sanscrit, the vowel sounds to be understood. They are so simple in their forms that they may be joined, as we sometimes join in our printed books, the letters *fi*, *ffi*, *fł*, *fłł*, &c. Thus the consonant K is written , and the consonant N thus . The sign of the long vowel A is . Now the syllable KA is written , and the syllable Na . I know of no other syllabary formed on this simple and elegant model.

The learned language is Chinese, but differently pronounced than in China, and for the same reason that has already been given for the Japanese. The Corœans want the nasal vowels of the Chinese, and cannot articulate them. They want the consonant *f*, of which the Chinese make such frequent use, and they have the consonant *b*, which the Chinese want. They have a multitude of double, successive, and aspirated consonants, very difficult to be pronounced. It is well known that the Chinese cannot articulate two consonants successively, and always interpose a vowel between. Besides, there are the four tones, or accents, by which the Chinese, in speaking, distinguish their homophonous words. These, probably, are not much attended to out of China, or are differently expressed. Though their words are Chinese, their manner of uttering them is so different that the two nations cannot make themselves understood of each other by word of mouth. Their vocal organs seem to be cast in different moulds.

There is nothing extraordinary in this. We vary, more or less, in the same manner in our pronunciation of the dead, and even of some living languages. M. Silvestre de Sacy, the author of the best Arabic grammar extant, could not understand Arabs when speaking, nor make himself understood by them. If an ancient Roman were to come again into this world, an Oxonian could hardly understand him, nor make himself understood by him in his own Latin; he would be obliged to take to his pen, or to his tablets, after the manner of the Corœans and the Japanese.

Thus the great miracle, which has exercised the fancy of so many enthusiasts and produced such strange theories, is naturally explained. This explanation is not to be sought in any thing inherent in the Chinese characters, in their external forms or in their greater perspicuity, but in their connexion with the languages for which they were formed, and in their peculiar adaptation to them. This was well understood by your learned correspondent when he inferred from the facts that he stated that all the languages which made use of the Chinese alphabet were formed on the same model, because he knew that those characters could not be applied to languages differently constructed. But in speaking thus generally, he did not advert to the vernacular languages of Japan, the Loo-Choo Islands, and Corea, so different from the Chinese that it was found impossible to apply to them the Chinese system of writing, though it was by the Chinese that they were civilized. Therefore I humbly conceive

that when those people read Chinese characters, they do not read them in their own vernacular tongue, but in the Chinese which they have learned, with only a different pronunciation of the words. It is otherwise with the people of Tunkin and Cochinchina, their language or languages being formed on the model of that of the Celestial Empire, with only some variations, which, in their schools, they learn to correct, and to employ the proper characters as a superior orthography, they are thereby enabled to read the Chinese, as well as their own language.

I submit these ideas to your learned correspondent, which, I hope, he will have the goodness to correct, if found erroneous. I beg you will be pleased to transmit to him a copy of this letter, with the assurance of my respect.

Your friend and obedient servant,

PETER S. DU PONCEAU.

*Philadelphia, Sept. 20, 1839.*

To JOHN VAUGHAN, Esq.